

The Ebb and Flow of Sir Jacques DePluntaine

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For this tale, I've taken inspiration from the Kula Exchange, which is a traditional symbolic material exchange that helps maintain and define the social relationships in the Trobriand Islands. In this Exchange, bracelets and necklaces were exchanged clockwise and counterclockwise as a sign of trust and respect toward one's neighbors. The networks of exchange are intricate and massive, and the trips between the islands are often long and dangerous. The value of the jewelry is symbolic, and for an outsider who was not familiar with the tradition, it could be easily misunderstood.

Sir Jacques DePluntaine sailed into the Trobriand Islands a man blessed through the danger, odds a thousand to one, but with the insight of none. On board *The Merry Seafarer*, he was the last survivor. The year was 1491, and he had traveled many leagues from his humble abode in England. He began his journey on *The Merry Seafarer* a lowly sailor, instructed to clean the upper deck and prepare the daily gruel for the rest of the crew. Now, Jacques was not a strong man, nor was he attractive or articulate. As the lowest ranking man on the crew, he was often the butt of jokes and pranks. Night after night he woke up with his prized heirloom, a golden bowl from which he ate his daily rations, hidden around the ship. Although he was, as they say, the underdog of the crew, his inability to stand up for himself and fight for his honor was glaring. To say he lacked pride was but an understatement, and with each prank performed against him, Jacques felt himself sink inward, begging for a sign that his life was worth the pain. He saw, himself, little reason for his existence. Although his fellow seamen did not comprehend the extent of the pain they caused the young sailor, each morning when he awoke to find the bowl once again removed from underneath his cot, he prayed each day could be his last.

Of course, as bullies are oft to do, the rest of the crew stared through Jacques transparently, doubting that a man of such outward simplicity would be marred so completely by their pranks. As they saw Jacques drag his weary body to the top deck in search of his prize possession, the captain exclaimed, "That boy has got to grow a sense of humor. He certainly isn't growing anything else!" Jacques heard these insults as he picked up his golden bowl, yet again cast aside under a pile of ropes and filled with the guts of a dozen rotting fish. He reached into the tumultuous sea, washing the bowl in the salty abyss. As he gazed down, watching the guts release themselves to a watery grave, he caught



his own reflection in the wavy mirror below. Jacques saw himself all too clearly: his small frame weak, clothes tattered, mouth in an all too familiar frown, not a friend to his name. And slowly, simply, his self revulsion led him to climb over the edge, jumping into the sea, obliterating the reflection that he so abhorred. It was easy, letting go, and as Jacques sank to the bottom of the sea, he had no happy images flash before his eyes.

He closed his eyes to the water around him, accepting his watery grave. Yet, unbeknownst to Jacques, he was being watched. The eye of the whale was enormous, bluer than the water that surrounded them, but lit with a spark of life that Jacques so severely lacked. Touching the sinking man with his fin, Jacques was resurrected by the power of the whale. In that instant, he was spirited back to the deck of the ship, dry of the salty seawater, holding the golden bowl in his hands.

Imagine the shock of dear Jacques, to lose track of time and space and his own actions! Jacques looked down into the water with a mixture of shock and amazement as the fin splashed up towards the rising sun, and the eye of an untold beast came in line with his own. The man grasped the edge of *The Merry Seafarer*, his gold clanking to the wooden floor as he held on for dear life. He waited for the waves of the giant whale to rock the ship, eyes closed. "Maybe this is what dying feels like...I must be hallucinating, but soon this will be over!" the dazed sailor assured himself, although the thought was in vain. The seconds dragged on, and through tentative slits of his eyes, Jacques peeked down at the water below him, now seeing only the calm, blue water. He released his death grip on the side of the ship, turning his back on the sea, intending to put this moment of madness behind him when he heard a voice. The noise was quiet at first, a whisper muted by the clatter of the men on the deck below preparing for their day.

"Jacques...Jacques..."

The desperate sailor teetered to the edge of the ship, longing for the assurance of the cobalt waves pulling him under once again. The fin reached toward the sky once more, a shimmering gray, and the eye soon appeared once more. In the expansive pupil, Jacques somehow knew he could trust this creature, the being so large that the entire ocean was his home. And as he gazed, still, the voice returned, quiet yet strong as he instructed the shaking man of his plan for a second chance, of the accomplishments they would achieve together.

The whale had seen Jacques, watched his struggles as he saw the tricks performed in his honor each dawn. Despite the ploys against him, the whale felt Jacques' sadness, and was inspired by the vulnerability of his spirit.

"I have saved you, Jacques, so that your life will not pass in vain. The sea is a cemetery to many, but your fate is now intertwined with mine, the master of these waters." The enormous sea creature now coughed



up a small glass container of poison onto the deck, a salvage of another unfortunate ship, its cargo floating free in the timeless sea. "One drop is all it takes. Do it slowly, and soon you will be the king of this ship. I will lead your way, just as I have taken control of your destiny."

It began the next day. A man dropped. There was no struggle, no scream for help. The crew, trusting and brutish, never thought to point their dying fingers at the lowly chef or the extra ingredient he added to their gruel, taking just enough to overdose one man a day. Jacques felt the fire of revenge light within him, and with each death he orchestrated, he felt himself crave his newfound control. In the early morning light, Jacques would sneak to the top deck and consult with the whale. They planned their voyage, constructing imaginary maps of their soon-to-be dynasty in the waves of the sea.

Each day, as a new man took his last breath, Jacques feigned concern and sorrow, the mirror of innocence that he lost within the great depths. But, amidst the claims of plague, he smiled a secret grin. With the help of the murderous ploys of the whale, Jacques alone held the fate of the ship, the fate of his own life. Soon he was the captain on an abandoned ship, bound for destiny and wealth. In the morning, Jacques awoke, master of his own craft, looking across the high seas and beyond the silhouette of his companion for land and the gold the natives on these backwards islands surely possessed. He would pillage them, the whale instructed; his success would not go unnoticed. He knighted himself, an uncharacteristic act, alone on the deck, within the gaze of the whale. For Jacques was changed, his mind rearranged for his second chance at life. Sir Jacques DePluntaine: master of his own destiny, more fortunate than any other. He had been tested, and he stepped forward victorious. He washed his bowl in the high seas, full from a double helping of gruel when he saw it...land!

The Merry Seafarer met the sand gracefully, that is, if a ship could possess grace. And in his craft, he watched. The island was small, and the people were few. "Savages," said Jacques to himself as he saw their tan skin and skimpy grass skirts through the spy glass he had taken from the captain, his final victim. With the help of this device, Jacques remained hidden from view, looking upon his future subjects with increasing interest mixed with boiling disdain. From his observations, Jacques understood little. Their activities reminded him of his past life, the place he had left behind. They lived as families, prepared food, played with children. He watched for days, with such intensity that he felt as though the spy glass may crumble in his eager hands. And then, one day, he saw it.

There were boats, still out of view, but closer this time. The beloved spy glass was held to his peering eyes, and Jacques, who now considered himself the expert master of these lowly people, was filled with



shock with what he saw. “The savages...the savages...they’re trading... is that...jewelry?”

He saw it then, dear Jacques, his body covered in the wealth of these people. His tattered clothing would be cast aside and instead he would adorn himself in the riches of his conquest. His small body would become grand, shimmering with untold jewels. “This is just the beginning,” Jacques negotiated with himself. “Tonight! I must go and collect what is mine. I will take those bracelets and then I will go to another island and take more and more until I have robbed the world of its treasures!” With an amused laugh, Jacques tossed his golden bowl into the sea. “Like this will be any use to me now...if only the crew could see me now!”

Darkness came, and Sir Jacques watched as the savages made their way to their homes, leaving the bounty in the center of the town. “How silly they are!” he marveled, “It’s like they want me to steal from them. These beasts deserve what’s coming to them!” The silence of the night remained as Jacques made his way to the center of the village, unprotected and unprepared. At the center of the village, he grabbed the bracelets, obscured by darkness as they were. This was only the beginning, he was sure.

While he was collecting the bracelets and necklaces in his satchel, he saw her. She walked through the darkness unafraid, evidently unaware of the stranger who had intruded her village. Although he could not call her beautiful, not in his sense of the word, Jacques was drawn to her. Like the other women, she wore a grass skirt and even in the darkness, the absence of the rest of her clothing made him blush. He approached her, overcome by the loneliness of a man without a human in the world to call a friend. Yet, in his thick-soled boots, a stick cracked and the mysterious woman screamed immediately, with words he could not understand and a fear he did not recognize.

Yet, the thick soles that prompted his discovery began to flee; with such speed and agility that soon the torches and yells that pursued him were but flashes of light and murmurs in the distance. Jacques would take no more subjects, for in the darkness the bounty and the whale would be his sole companions. From humans, through their unexpected nature and propensity for fear, he was now removed.

He pushed the ship from its sandy embankment, and all the sea seemed to rise in his honor, pulling him in as the vessel poised itself for its next grand adventure. Yet, without the whale in sight, Jacques stood with the highest confidence; certain he possessed the skills to navigate his own ship without the all-knowing guidance of his magical companion.

The whale watched from below, amused by the transformation in the man that he had seen. Yet, without his continued help, Jacques was as vulnerable as he had been on the day they met, eyes closed



to the depths. And to the depths he would return, the marred mess of humanity fingerprinting its way through the precious waters of the whale. The revenge would be sweet, yet the knowledge of his ultimate control propelled the creature forward as he swam off, to the darkest corners of his territory that were yet unmatched by the black of his own soul.

That night, a great storm shook the ship, and off the edge Sir Jacques fell. He, too, made his grave in the fluid darkness, with his bounty in hand. Foolish Jacques took his last breath the king to one, with grave goods of relic, of worth to none.

